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ABSTRACT

It is widely believed that the Chinese elderly enjoy high levels of family support. The success of the "one couple one child" campaign has made the Chinese and non-Chinese aware of the fragility of intergenerational transfer payments. The spectre is raised of a typical family as one with a couple in their early 40s caring for four elderly parents and a teenager. Recent studies indicate that the elderly living with at least one child (joint living) is the norm, despite variations among communities and classes. In cities, housing shortages and income are determining factors. For rural elderly, the wealthier are more likely to live jointly, although the new responsibility system does not force children into joint living. Individual preferences, class, and regional differences will produce more varied household compositions. Until 1978 most elderly relied on their children for financial support. With retirement legislation of 1978, the number of pensioners has rapidly grown, and the generous amount of the pensions has often made elderly parents the family's dominant financial power. It is unknown if the one couple one child policy will be successful and strain families in 40 years. By the end of this century the dependency ratio will dramatically drop with more workers per retired person. If this produces more wealth, and thus less financial pressure for joint living, more diversity can be expected in the family life of Chinese elderly. (ABL)

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FAMILY SUPPORTS FOR CHINESE ELDERLY: Current and Future Trends

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Today it is widely believed both in China and abroad that Chinese elderly enjoy high levels of family support. Gone is the earlier concern that communism has destroyed the family. And in its place is a virtually unchallenged optimism that Chinese elderly enjoy a family support system unmatched in the developing world of the 1980s. Yet at the same time as many are so unfailingly sanguine about the present position of the elderly in their families, views of the future are often negative. The success of the "one couple one child" campaign has made both Chinese and non-Chinese extremely aware of population aging, dependency ratios, and the fragility of intergenerational transfer payments. In fact, so enamored have many become of projective demographic models, that virtually every recent discussions of the future of the Chinese family support system raises the spectre of a typical family as one with a couple in their early forties struggling to support four elderly parents and one teenager.

Needless to say close scrutiny of the current reality and of the assumptions behind the apocalyptic visions of the future are problematic. In the time that remains I will briefly comment on some of the primary characteristics of the current forms of family supports and then suggest the most likely areas for significant change in the immediate future.

Living Arrangements:

The first indicator of strong family supports for the elderly comes from data on living arrangements. In a study I did of rural and urban elderly in the 1970s, I found that 70% of the rural elderly and 90% of the urban elderly I studied, lived with at least one child, and only 9% of rural elderly and none of the urban elderly lived alone (Davis-Friedmann, 1983:122). Recently published surveys by Chinese scholars as well as a small family history project I completed in September in Shanghai, suggest that joint living continues to be the norm --- even the ideal --- for many, but that preeminence of three generation households is declining (Wucheng shi, (1985); Hu (1986), Zhao (1985).

However, equally significance as the decline in the percentage of joint households, is the increased variation from one community to another and the increasing class differentiation. Explanations for these changes vary between urban and rural areas.

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In the cities, three generation households appears primarily to be a function of housing shortages. Thus Shanghai, the richest, and some would say most sophisticated and modern city has a relatively high rate of joint living because it has the most severe housing crisis, while Beijing and Tianjin which have enjoyed greater increases of residential housing since 1978 have lower rates of three generational households (Yuan Fang (1986); Pasternak (1986); Yuan Jihui (1983)). However within cities, income also makes a difference. In one recently published provincial handbook from Shanxi province (Shanxi Tongji Nianjian 1983:199) average household size steadily declines with higher average income. My recent fieldwork in urban China suggests a curvilinear relationship between wealth and family size, with both the wealthiest and the poorest the most likely to live jointly. At this point in the analysis, I think that this pattern is most likely an indication of a situation particular to contemporary cities where the poorest often live in privately owned households which can be jerrybuilt to add a second married couple, and the wealthiest are veteran cadres who at retirement receive especially spacious quarters designed to accomodate both them and a married child.

In the countryside wealth also is decisive, but usually in a more straightforward manner. One published study (Zhao (1985) comparing the family structures of ordinary peasant families and peasants in "specialized households" found that the richer specialized households were 50% more likely to live in three generation households than ordinary families (34% as opposed to 23%). Thus at first glance it appears that just as before the Communist revolution, the richer rural elderly are the most likely to live in large households. However from reports of three colleagues (Mak Gong, Graham Johnson, Anita Chan) who have visited several Guangcong villages this past summer as well as from reports of Chinese colleagues now in the midst of rural surveys in North and Central China it is clear that wealth alone does not guarantee joint households. These researchers all reported that under the new responsibility system there is little social pressure to force children who rejected parents who could not pull their own weight in the household economy to continue joint living. As a result between 10 to 20% of elderly in these villages had been forced to "go it alone", and as a result, suffered a very dramatic decline in overall standard of living.

At this point in time, we do not have enough data, to allow us to identify new national trends. But what is clear is that in contrast to the 1960s and 1970s when most villagers lived under similar constraints of a collective economy and tighter political controls, the new reforms have ushered in an era where class differences, regional subcultures, and individual preferences will produce a more varied pattern of household composition. And under these conditions, it seems likely that the percentage of isolated, and even abandoned elderly parents will increase.

One characteristic of the existing joint families, however, that has not changed is the continuing preference for joint and stem families to be patrilineal. Thus for example in my September study of recent retirees in Shanghai, where most of the respondents were rather well educated, city

born workers in their early fifties. I found that less than 10% of the newly married daughters, but 70% of the newly married sons stayed in the home of the parents after marriage. Mothers kept close ties with the daughters after the young women left home, sometimes even keeping their daughters' children during the work week, yet still the dominant pattern was for sons rather than daughters to remain at home after marriage. Thus just as it is clear that the current economic reforms promise to create a more varied pattern of household arrangements among the elderly overall, and seem to increase the risk for total family breakdown, strong traditional cultural preferences about the form of family composition persist even among the most modern segments of the population.

Pensions and Financial Support:

From 1949 through 1978, most elderly men and women relied on their children for financial support. Elderly in the countryside continued to work until virtually bedridden. And elderly parents who specialized in handicraft work, or were expert at raising cash crops, were definitely more of an asset than a burden. Once their health failed, however, they became totally dependent on their children for nursing care and financial support.

In the cities, a generous pension program begun in 1952 replaced 70% of the last wage, but restrictions on eligibility meant that even by the late 1970s only about 20% of urban elderly had qualified. Therefore during the decades prior to the post-mao reforms when there were virtually no opportunities for part-time or entrepreneurial employment in Chinese cities, the vast majority of elderly had to depend entirely on the good will of their children for daily survival.

After 1978, the situation changed dramatically for urban elderly. New retirement legislation lowered eligibility requirements, and the government made a decision to push mandatory retirement for women over 50 and men over 60. The growth in the number of pensioners, and particularly female pensioners has been phenomenal. In 1978 there were 3.14 million pensioners (Zhongguo Shenqi Tongji Nianjian Cailiao:126). By December 1985, there were 16.3 million (Beijing Review Nov.3,1986), with an expected annual increase of one million for each of the next five years. In less than a decade, the percentage of urban elderly receiving pensions rose from 20% to 66%.

So generous have the pensions become that in many families of "young-old", elderly parents are often the dominant financial power in the family. This is particularly the case among former Party leaders, but it is also the case in the families I interviewed in Shanghai and among young elderly of all social classes. (Yuan Fang (1986); Yang (1985); Hu (1986).

But one must be very cautious about generalizing from the healthy, and recently retired to all urban elderly. Among those over 70, and particularly among women of this age, the almost universal situation is still one of total financial dependency. To date, surveys indicate that the oldest urban women continue to remain within the homes of their sons

and daughters, well cared for and content. But as a higher percentage of the oldest old become frail, and as the healthy young pensioners become physically weaker, the pressures on families will increase.

This last trip to China, friends and colleagues talked frequently about the strain of caring for a bedridden elderly parent, and they spoke about the need for more nursing homes and more social services for home care. In the twelve months between December 1983 and December 1984, the number of elderly living in old age homes doubled. It still remains an insignificant 0.4% of the population over 60, but it does document a trend that is likely to increase very rapidly. (Communique of the State Statistical Bureau, 1985).

Changing Dependency Ratios

And finally, a comment about the demographic spectre of the two middle aged adults struggling to support five dependents. First we need to stress that this extreme situation which seems to have captured the attention of so many, will only occur if the one-couple one-child policy is a total success. Furthermore, the predicted crisis is still forty years in the future. Total TFR now is about 2.6, and even official policy is now assuming something around 2 as ideal (Nan Tang Ri Bao 1986.6.1; Tien (1986). But more important than weighing the accuracy of these long term predictions for the middle of the 21st century, is an evaluation of the impact of known demographic shifts on the population structure of the next 15 years.

In 1982 there were 150 million Chinese citizens 50 and above. By the end of this century that number will double as those born between 1935 and 1949 pass into early old age. At the same time as these vast numbers move into retirement, however, the 364 million who were born between 1962 and 1977 and survived early childhood will enter the workforce. The result will be a dramatic decline in the dependency ratio, from its 1982 rate of 61/100, to 46/100 (Wu (1986). Less clear is the likely outcome on relations between elderly parents and their adult children. Does a lower overall rate of dependency have any predictable effect on the ability for the state to spend more on social services to the elderly? Will it solve the housing shortage? Will it so greatly increase productivity and wages that the young will consistently earn more than the old? There is not definitive precedent, but an educated guess based on the work of Alejandro Portes on social security in South America, is that in a country as poor as China, the extra income generated by falling dependency ratios will be consumed by those of working age to raise their current standard of living. If this prediction is correct, and we see a shift to higher levels of consumption among the working age population, I would expect to see fundamental changes for the family life of rural and urban elderly. Increased housing supplies will reduce the necessity of joint living. Increased salaries will reduce the need for the young to pool incomes with the old. And as more elderly parents need expensive medical care and time consuming home care, the burdens of supporting elderly parents without increased social services will seem greater for this next generation of

family caretakers than for those of the recent past.

To date the high levels of interdependence we have observed in Chinese families have largely been the result of necessity. If the lower dependency ratios of the next two decades produce more wealth, and thus less pressure from necessity, I would predict new patterns of intergenerational solidarity. In particular, as already noted in the discussion of housing, I would expect more diversity, and thus Chinese family support systems will be arranged along a continuum from stronger to weaker as in our own country. Differences due to birth order, social class, gender, and individual psychology will become increasingly important, and as a result it will be less possible to generalize about the family life of Chinese elderly. And certainly it will be ABSOLUTELY impossible to talk about the family life of Chinese elderly in 7 minutes.

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